

Jo Ann Emerson

1950–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
REPUBLICAN FROM MISSOURI

1996–



Image courtesy of the Member

THOUGH JO ANN EMERSON NEVER HELD ELECTIVE OFFICE prior to succeeding her late husband, Representative Bill Emerson, her upbringing, work experience, and marriage suited her to the task. Within a short period, Congresswoman Emerson established herself as one of the Republican Party's leading women. "I never sought this job. Fate put me here," she said. "So I want to take the skills that I have, whether it's coalition building or strategy or being able to solve problems, and put them to work. I'm very locally oriented. I want to get things done for the folks back home."¹

Jo Ann Hermann was born in Bethesda, Maryland, on September 16, 1950, daughter of Ab Hermann, a former professional baseball player and executive director of the Republican National Committee, and Sylvia Hermann. She grew up near Washington and was initiated into politics at an early age. Hale Boggs, the Louisiana politician who eventually became House Majority Leader, was a neighbor and the families socialized often. Jo Ann Hermann earned a B.A. in political science from Ohio Wesleyan University in 1972 and pursued a career in public affairs as a lobbyist, first working for the National Restaurant Association. In 1975, she married lobbyist Bill Emerson of Missouri, and the couple raised five children. In 1980, Bill Emerson defeated an incumbent Democrat from a district representing the sprawling agricultural and mining region in rural southeast Missouri to win a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Jo Ann Emerson worked as deputy communications director for the National Republican Congressional Committee in the early 1980s. She later served as senior vice president of public affairs for the American Insurance Association.²

Shortly before his death from lung cancer in June 1996, Bill Emerson asked his wife to consider taking his seat, a request repeated by his staff and constituents.³ Emerson agreed, and her first campaign reflected her husband's conservative philosophy and skills as a consensus builder. Her slogan was "Putting People First." She recalled that she had planned to make the seat "a living memorial to Bill."⁴ For a role model, Emerson looked to Lindy Boggs, who served with distinction for nearly two decades after succeeding her husband in 1973 when he was killed in an airplane crash.⁵ Two elections were scheduled for the same day that following November: a special election to fill the last two months of Bill Emerson's unexpired term and an election for the full term in the 105th Congress (1997–1999). Jo Ann Emerson received the Republican nomination for the unexpired term, but for the general election, she was unable to meet a filing deadline for the GOP primary won by Richard Kline. Emerson entered that contest as an Independent (later affiliating herself with the Republicans), winning the unexpired term with 63 percent and the full term with 51 percent. In each of her four re-election campaigns, Emerson has been returned to office without difficulty, capturing a high of 72 percent of the vote in 2002 and 2004.⁶ In January 2000, Emerson married St. Louis labor lawyer Ron Gladney.

When Representative Emerson entered the 105th Congress in January 1997, she received assignments to three committees: Agriculture, Small Business, and Transportation and Infrastructure. In the 106th Congress (1999–2001), Emerson earned a seat on the prestigious Appropriations Committee which required her to give up her other assignments. She serves on three Appropriations subcommittees: Agriculture, Homeland Security, and Energy and Water Development.

In her early House career, Emerson's legislative interests were firmly local: improving Missouri's highways and securing federal funds for a bridge over the Mississippi River, as well as support for mining and timber interests, more student loan grants, and agricultural research. She also played a role in revitalizing the Rural Caucus in 2000, serving as one of its two co-chairs. Representing an agricultural district, Emerson has focused on trade issues. She has worked in bipartisan fashion with Democrats to prod U.S. officials to reopen trade with Cuba. In the spring of 2001, Emerson traveled to Havana, where she and a delegation of lawmakers opened a dialogue with Cuban leader Fidel Castro about expanding agricultural trade relations, to free the flow of American-grown rice and other commodities to the island nation.⁷ Teaming up with Massachusetts Democrat Jim McGovern, Emerson has led efforts to fund international food aid for schoolchildren using U.S. commodities as part of the McGovern–Dole Food for Education program.⁸

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Jo Ann Emerson," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

NOTES

- 1 Lloyd Grove, "The Congresswoman's House of Memories; Jo Ann Emerson, Following in Her Husband's Footsteps," 27 November 1996, *Washington Post*: B1.
- 2 *Politics in America*, 2004: (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2003): 590–591; *Congressional Directory*, 108th Cong. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2003): 153.
- 3 Grove, "The Congresswoman's House of Memories; Jo Ann Emerson, Following in Her Husband's Footsteps."
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Lorraine Adams, "Keepers of the Flame," 1 November 1998, *Good Housekeeping*.
- 6 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/index.html>.
- 7 Deirdre Shesgreen, "Emerson Says Cuba Visit Was Productive Despite Failure to Get Results," 17 April 2001, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: A4.
- 8 James Collins, "Rep. Emerson Suggests Strong Link Between Hunger, Terrorism; Feeding Children Abroad Is Good for U.S. Farmers, National Security, She Says," 5 July 2002, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: A5.